



**THE CONCEPTUAL EVOLUTION OF CRISIS COMMUNICATION
IN THE AVIATION INDUSTRY:
*FROM THE THREAT PARADIGM TO THE OPPORTUNITY PARADIGM***

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Abstract

Crisis communication scholarship has increasingly shifted from viewing crises solely as threats (Birkland, 1968; Fearn-Banks, 1996; Seeger et al., 1998; Pearson & Clair, 1998; Heath & Millar, 2004) to organizational well-being toward recognizing them as potential opportunities for learning and renewal (Coombs, 2019; Diers-Lawson, 2019; Covello, 2022). This theoretical article traces the evolution of crisis communication paradigms, with a focus on the aviation industry as a high-stakes context frequently beset by crises. Early models, such as Corporate Apologia (Hearit, 2006), Image Repair Theory (Benoit, 1995, 1997, 2008) and Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) (Coombs, 1995, 1999, 2006, 2019), conceptualized crises primarily as reputation threats to be mitigated through defensive messaging. Newer approaches, including the Discourse of Renewal (Ulmer, 2007) and the Rhetorical Arena Theory (Frandsen & Johansen, 2010, 2017), reframe crises as catalysts for positive change, emphasizing stakeholder engagement, ethical communication, and organizational growth. By integrating key theories (SCCT, Image Repair, Arena theory, etc.) and illustrating their application to airline companies (e.g. TAROM, Wizz Air, Blue Air), the paper elucidates how the “threat paradigm” is being supplanted by an “opportunity paradigm” in crisis communication thinking. A summary table of major crisis communication theories is provided, aligning each with either a threat-centric or opportunity-centric perspective in the aviation context. The article concludes that airline organizations can benefit from adopting

a renewal-oriented mindset, which not only mitigates damage but also strengthens trust and resilience in the aftermath of crises.

Keywords: *crisis communication, airline communication, opportunity paradigm, aviation industry, strategic communication.*

Introduction

The aviation industry is one of the most crisis-prone business sectors, confronting a wide array of emergencies—from technical failures and extreme weather disruptions to global pandemics and terrorism (Scheiwiller & Zizka, 2021, p. 20). Each incident, whether a tragic accident or a reputation-damaging scandal, can swiftly escalate into a full-blown crisis under intense public scrutiny. Effective crisis communication is therefore mission-critical for airlines, as it can mean the difference between exacerbating the damage or restoring public confidence. Traditionally, the role of crisis communication has been conceptualized in defensive terms: a necessary response to protect an organization's reputation from the threats posed by a crisis (Coombs, 2007). In this threat paradigm, a crisis is seen as an acute danger or “attack” on the organization, and communication efforts focus on damage control, image defense, and blame management. However, contemporary scholarships and practice suggest a paradigmatic shift. An emerging opportunity paradigm posits that crises, while disruptive, also create openings for organizations to learn, improve, and even enhance their reputation by demonstrating accountability and transparency (Ulmer, 2007).

This article examines the conceptual evolution of crisis communication from the threat paradigm to the opportunity paradigm, with a special emphasis on how these ideas apply to airline companies. Airlines such as TAROM, Wizz Air, and Blue Air have faced crises that illustrate this evolution in real terms – from operational failures and service disruptions to public relations controversies. The selection of TAROM, Wizz Air, and Blue Air as focal case studies in this analysis is grounded in their strategic relevance and representativeness within the Romanian and broader Central and Eastern European aviation market. These three airlines exemplify distinct business models—TAROM as a national full-service legacy carrier, Wizz Air as one of the most prominent ultra-low-cost carriers in Europe, and Blue Air as a hybrid budget airline that has undergone rapid expansion followed by operational decline. Their varied approaches to crisis

communication during the COVID-19 pandemic and other operational disruptions provide a diverse empirical foundation for exploring how different organizational identities and market positions shape crisis response strategies.

By reviewing key theories and models in crisis communication and situating them in the context of the aviation industry, the author develops a theoretical framework for understanding how crisis communication strategies have shifted over time. The author then discusses the paradigmatic transition from seeing crisis communication as primarily threat-oriented to viewing it as opportunity-oriented, providing conceptual illustrations from airline cases. Finally, we summarize these insights in a comparative table and conclude with implications for both theory and practice in the field. The goal is to shed light on how airline companies can move “from crisis to opportunity” in their communication approaches, aligning with the most current paradigms in crisis communication research.

Theoretical Framework

Crisis Communication: Definitions and Early Approaches.

At its core, crisis communication can be defined as the strategic dialog between an organization and its stakeholders before, during, and after a crisis, aimed at minimizing harm and restoring normalcy. Fearn-Banks (1996) described crisis communication as the dialogue that protects the organization’s reputation and maintains public trust during crises, highlighting preparation and response as critical elements. In the aviation sector, where crises often have immediate public visibility and safety implications, crisis communication encompasses not only public relations messaging but also timely information dissemination to passengers, families, regulators, and media. A crisis is generally “taken as a threat to the organizational reputation”, with potential to disrupt stakeholder confidence and organizational performance. Therefore, early crisis communication theories and models framed the problem in terms of threat mitigation – how to avert or lessen the reputational damage inflicted by a crisis event (Coombs, 2019).

One of the foundational theoretical approaches in this threat-oriented tradition is Corporate Apologia (Hearit, 2006). Stemming from rhetoric, apologia theory examines how organizations respond to accusations or blame in crises by offering a defense or justification. Hearit (2006) characterized corporate apologia as an effort to rebut charges and protect the organization’s image, much like an individual defending their character when accused. Importantly, “apologia” in this

context does not mean saying “sorry” for wrongdoing; rather, it means a speech in defense – often involving strategies such as denial, counter-attack, or explanation to absolve the organization of full responsibility. This reflects the threat paradigm’s focus on mitigating blame: the organization is portrayed as a protagonist under threat, aiming to refute or reduce its perceived fault in the eyes of the public.

Closely related to apologia is William Benoit’s Image Repair Theory (also known as Image Restoration Theory). Benoit (1995, 1997, 2008) formalized a typology of image repair strategies that an organization or individual can employ when their reputation has been sullied by a crisis. These strategies include denial (outright rejection of responsibility), evading responsibility (e.g., blaming external causes or claiming the crisis was accidental), reducing offensiveness of the event (through bolstering, minimization, or attacking the accuser), corrective action (promising to fix the problem), and mortification (apologizing for the misdeed). The underlying premise of Image Repair Theory is that communication is goal-directed and that maintaining a favorable reputation is a key goal for organizations. In other words, crises are significant because they threaten reputational assets, and thus organizations are motivated to strategically communicate in order to repair any damage to their image. Benoit’s theory is firmly rooted in the threat paradigm: its “purpose is to protect an individual, company, or organization facing a public challenge to its reputation”.

For example, in the airline industry, Benoit and Czerwinski’s (1997) analysis of USAir’s response to a fatal crash illustrated how an airline employed image repair strategies (like emphasizing safety improvements and expressing sympathy) to restore its credibility after a tragedy. Such strategies were aimed at reassuring the public and mitigating the threat to the airline’s reputation.

Another major theoretical contribution in this lineage is W. Timothy Coombs’s Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT). SCCT (Coombs, 1995, 1999, 2006, 2019) is a framework that links the type of crisis situation to the appropriate communication response, based on the level of reputational threat posed. Coombs (2019) argues that stakeholders’ perceptions of a crisis – particularly attributions of responsibility for the crisis – should guide how an organization responds. SCCT posits that crises can be categorized (e.g., as victim crises, accidental crises, or preventable crises), and each category carries a different level of organizational responsibility and reputational damage. The theory suggests that “crisis managers should match strategic crisis responses to the level of crisis responsibility and reputational threat posed by a crisis” (Coombs,

2019, p. 12). For instance, if an airline is clearly the victim of unforeseeable external forces (such as a freak weather event causing an accident), SCCT would prescribe a less accommodative response (focus on informing and adjusting information) since stakeholders are likely to assign low blame to the company. Conversely, if an airline's own negligence caused a crisis (e.g., poor maintenance leading to a technical failure), the reputational threat is high, and SCCT would recommend adopting apology and corrective action strategies to mend trust. SCCT built on earlier image-focused theories by providing an evidence-based, situational approach to threat assessment and response selection. Nonetheless, its fundamental orientation remains on protecting reputational assets during a crisis, consistent with the threat paradigm (Coombs, 2019, p.12).

In addition to these, the Contingency Theory of Conflict Management (Cameron, Pang, & Jin, 2008) emerged as another strategic perspective, suggesting that an organization's stance in a crisis can range on a continuum from defensive to accommodative, depending on various internal and external contingencies. Unlike one-size-fits-all prescriptive models, contingency theory holds that dozens of factors (e.g., evidence, relationships, threat extent, etc.) influence whether an organization chooses a more adversarial (threat-focused) or a more conciliatory strategy at any given time. This theory provided a bridge between purely rhetorical approaches and strategic management, highlighting flexibility and adaptation in crisis responses. For example, a low-cost carrier like Wizz Air might initially adopt a defensive posture when facing allegations (to protect its cost-driven business model's reputation), but shift to a more accommodative stance (apology, compensation) if public anger grows – all depending on contingent variables like media coverage or stakeholder pressure. The contingency perspective thus underscores that even within a threat paradigm, responses are not static; organizations continuously strategize their communicative stance as a crisis unfolds.

Crisis Communication in a Multi-Vocal Environment.

As scholarship advanced, researchers recognized that the traditional, organization-centric view of crisis communication (implied in apologia, image repair, and even SCCT) did not fully capture the complexity of modern crises. The rise of the internet and especially social media in the 21st century transformed the crisis communication landscape, allowing many voices – not just the organization's officials or the mass media – to participate in shaping the narrative. In response, Arena Theory (also known as the *Rhetorical Arena Theory*) was proposed by Frandsen and

Johansen (2010, 2017) as a new paradigm for understanding crisis communication dynamics. Arena Theory posits that a crisis is like a public arena or forum in which multiple stakeholders (the organization, victims, regulators, customers, journalists, activists, social media influencers, etc.) actively communicate, often simultaneously and interactively. These various actors “meet, compete, collaborate or negotiate during a crisis situation” (Frandsen & Johansen, 2017), each attempting to influence the course of events and public perception. Rather than a single controlled message from the company, crisis communication becomes multi-vocal.

In the rhetorical arena, an airline’s crisis narrative might be influenced not only by the airline’s official statements, but also by viral videos from passengers, tweets from industry analysts, posts by government agencies, and news media framing. A pertinent example is the 2017 United Airlines incident where a passenger was forcibly dragged off an overbooked flight. United’s initial crisis response (a defensive statement emphasizing the passenger’s non-compliance) was immediately challenged and overshadowed by widespread outrage on social media, as videos taken by other passengers went viral globally. United eventually had to adjust its communication – the CEO issued a public apology and took full responsibility – in direct reaction to the arena of voices demanding accountability.

The *Rhetorical Arena* model thus contributes to the evolving understanding of crisis communication by highlighting that organizations no longer operate in a top-down communication environment. Particularly for airlines, which have very public-facing operations, crisis communication requires engagement with this cacophony of voices. The arena concept aligns with a shift toward dialogic and transparent communication: an airline must listen and respond to stakeholders in real time, not just disseminate press releases. While Arena Theory itself is relatively neutral regarding “threat” or “opportunity,” it lays the groundwork for viewing crisis communication as an interactive process that can enable mutual learning. By acknowledging stakeholders as active communicators, organizations can move beyond treating them as mere audiences to be managed (a hallmark of the threat paradigm) and toward treating them as partners in resolving the crisis (an idea compatible with the opportunity paradigm, as we will discuss).

Another influential framework that mirrors this changing communication climate is the Social-Mediated Crisis Communication (SMCC) model put forward by Liu, Austin, and Jin (2011) and further explicated by Austin and Jin (2016). The SMCC model dissects how information flows in crises through social media, highlighting the roles of formers (those who create content), followers

(who consume and share content), and inactives. The model underscores that organizations must tailor their communication strategies to both traditional media and social media, as well as engage with influential social media users. In the airline industry, crises now often unfold on platforms like Twitter or Facebook in real time. For example, when Blue Air (a Romanian low-cost airline) suddenly suspended all flights in September 2022 amid financial trouble, thousands of stranded passengers voiced their frustration online and the news spread rapidly through Facebook groups and Twitter updates. Blue Air's own communication was sparse and seen as evasive – blaming government actions for the shutdown– which further inflamed public anger. This incident exemplifies how failing to actively manage the social-mediated arena of communication can turn a crisis into a reputational catastrophe. Modern theories like SMCC remind us that crisis communication must be always-on, responsive, and multi-channel, reflecting an adaptive mindset that goes beyond the one-way, protective communications of the past.

Emerging Opportunity-Oriented Approaches.

Even as researchers accounted for the complex, networked nature of crisis communication, another stream of theory began to recast the very purpose and outcome of crisis responses. Rather than asking only how organizations can defend themselves, scholars like Ulmer, Sellnow, and Seeger asked how organizations can learn, grow, or improve through crises. They observed that in some cases, organizations emerged from crises stronger or with enhanced legitimacy, especially if they communicated in ways that emphasized renewal and positive change. This gave rise to what we call the opportunity paradigm of crisis communication. Central to this paradigm is the Discourse of Renewal Theory.

Ulmer et al. (2007) introduced *renewal* as a post-crisis communication orientation that focuses on the future rather than the past. In contrast to image repair theory which “concentrates on mitigating the damage caused by a crisis,” renewal discourse “does not focus on damage control but on aspiration – the vision for moving beyond the crisis” (Ulmer et al., 2007). Ulmer and colleagues argued that some crises are “best understood as opportunities for substantial change that ultimately benefit stakeholders”. In other words, a crisis can serve as a turning point, prompting an organization to undergo positive transformations (such as reforms, stronger ethical standards, improved safety practices, or innovation) that might not have occurred without the catalyst of the crisis. The discourse of renewal is characterized by several key elements: a prospective vision

(looking forward to what will be improved), a strong emphasis on core values and ethics, and a focus on optimism and hope rather than blame. It encourages leaders to communicate with messages of renewal – for example, outlining how the organization will make things right and prevent recurrence, and how it will use the crisis as a chance to better serve its stakeholders. This approach often involves genuine apology and taking responsibility as a starting point (acknowledging the reality of the crisis), but then pivoting to meaningful actions for recovery and improvement.

In the aviation context, a renewal-oriented strategy can be particularly powerful given the high stakes of safety and trust. A textbook example is the response of AirAsia to the crash of flight QZ8501 in 2014. AirAsia's CEO Tony Fernandes won praise worldwide for his compassionate, transparent, and forward-looking communication during the crisis. He immediately traveled to meet with victims' families, provided frequent updates on social media expressing heartfelt concern, and crucially, accepted full responsibility: "I am the leader of this company. I take responsibility... The passengers were on my aircraft, and I have to take responsibility for that". By avoiding the defensiveness that many companies default to, and instead focusing on doing right by the victims and learning from the incident, AirAsia managed to preserve and even bolster its reputation for caring and responsibility. Such a response illustrates the opportunity paradigm: the crisis was communicated as a moment for renewed commitment to AirAsia's values (safety, care for customers) and for making systemic improvements, rather than merely a reputational threat to fend off.

Renewal theory does not naively imply that a crisis is a "good" thing or that damage is irrelevant; rather, it urges organizations to "never waste a good crisis" – to use even the darkest times to reflect and institute positive change. It complements, rather than wholly replaces, traditional strategies: an organization should still stabilize the situation and address immediate concerns (for example, an airline must first account for all passengers and cooperate with investigators after an accident, attending to victims' needs) – but renewal adds an additional layer focused on how the organization will be better in the future. Scholars have identified four primary components of renewal discourse in practice: organizational learning (publicly showing how the organization has learned from the failure), ethical communication (honesty and responsibility in dealing with the public), a prospective vision (emphasizing the future and optimism over dwelling on blame), and sound organizational rhetoric that inspires and motivates stakeholders toward a shared positive outcome.

When these elements are present, “a well-articulated renewal discourse can convert a risky situation into an opportunity to strengthen relationships with the public and renew the organization itself”. Alongside renewal theory, other contemporary models also echo the opportunity paradigm. For instance, Coombs and Holladay (2012) discussed “post-crisis communication and renewal”, acknowledging the potential for positive outcomes after crises.

Likewise, the concept of organizational resilience in crisis management literature – while not a communication theory per se – dovetails with the opportunity view by focusing on how organizations bounce back stronger. Communication is a key part of resilience, as it involves narrative-building: framing the crisis not just as a failure, but as a challenge that the company will overcome and learn from. In academic and practitioner circles, the adage “never waste a crisis” (often attributed to Winston Churchill) has gained traction, encapsulating the idea that crises can spur much-needed innovation, policy change, or cultural shifts within organizations that would otherwise be difficult to accomplish. For airlines, this could mean using a crisis as an impetus to overhaul safety protocols, improve customer care policies, or reinforce a culture of transparency

Paradigmatic Shifts: From Threat to Opportunity

The evolution from the threat paradigm to the opportunity paradigm in crisis communication can be understood as a broadening of perspective—one that does not jettison the lessons of the past but rather builds upon them to embrace a more holistic view of what a crisis means for an organization. Table 1 provides a summary of major crisis communication theories, categorizing each as aligned with either a threat-centric or opportunity-centric paradigm, and notes their application in the aviation industry. Before discussing the table, we elucidate the nature of this paradigmatic shift.

In the threat paradigm, the guiding metaphor is defense. A crisis is conceptualized as an assault on the organization’s integrity, whether the “assailant” is a sudden disaster, a product failure, negative publicity, or any event that draws criticism and could erode reputation. The central questions driving communication in this paradigm are: “*How can we explain or excuse what happened? How can we convince stakeholders to retain their confidence in us?*” The theories under this umbrella (Apologia, Image Repair, SCCT, etc.) equip organizations with a repertoire of strategies to answer these questions - be it through rhetorical defense, corrective action, or selecting the right tone given the level of responsibility. The strength of the threat paradigm is its realistic

acknowledgment that crises *do* pose genuine threats: lives may be lost, reputation and finances can suffer, stakeholders feel anger or betrayal. In the airline industry, this paradigm has dominated crisis planning for decades, given how a single incident (like a crash or a serious service failure) can devastate an airline's business if not managed properly. Airlines have developed elaborate crisis communications manuals focusing on press conferences, media statements, and reputation repair tactics for this reason. For example, when a malfunction or accident occurs, standard practice has been to activate an emergency communications plan that includes immediate expression of concern for victims, cooperation with authorities, and strategically framing the incident in a way that emphasizes it being isolated or unavoidable (if true). These actions are fundamentally about containing the threat – reassuring the public that flying with the airline is still safe and that the airline remains trustworthy.

However, exclusive reliance on the threat paradigm can lead to shortcomings. Emphasizing damage control can tempt organizations to become overly defensive or opaque, which in the current media environment often backfires. United Airlines' initial handling of the 2017 overbooking fiasco (mentioned earlier) is a case in point: by focusing on justifying the crew's actions and minimizing the company's blame, United's communication was perceived as tone-deaf and only intensified public furor. Similarly, Blue Air's response to its 2022 operational crisis—blaming government regulators for freezing its accounts and offering little apology or direct remedy to stranded customers—illustrates how a pure threat-focus (in this case, trying to deflect blame externally) can severely undermine stakeholder trust. In both instances, the companies eventually had to shift course: United's CEO Oscar Muñoz apologized repeatedly and vowed to change policies, and Blue Air's brand suffered to the point of near-collapse, serving as a cautionary tale for others. These examples highlight that while identifying threats is crucial, neglecting the opportunities (such as the opportunity to show empathy, to take responsibility, and to improve) can worsen the long-term impact of a crisis.

The opportunity paradigm, in contrast, encourages organizations to also ask: *“What can we learn and how can we improve because of this crisis? How might this crisis ultimately make us better or strengthen our stakeholder relationships?”* This outlook does not imply that the crisis is desired, but it sees the response phase as a pivotal moment where the organization's actions and communications could lead to *positive transformation*. It's a shift from a reactive posture to a proactive, reformative one. In practical terms, for airlines this could mean publicly committing to

new safety measures after an incident, voluntarily offering generous compensation and care to affected passengers (beyond what is legally required), or engaging stakeholders in dialogue about how to prevent future issues. An airline exemplifying the opportunity paradigm might say, “*We deeply regret what happened, and we are using this event to fundamentally review and improve our processes to serve you better going forward,*” thereby framing its narrative around *improvement* rather than just *atonement*.

Notably, adopting an opportunity mindset tends to foster more stakeholder-centric communication – focusing on the needs and values of those impacted – rather than a purely organization-centric defense. This is aligned with what modern stakeholders expect: studies have shown that publics are more forgiving when an organization demonstrates empathy, transparency, and a plan of action for the future, as opposed to when it only offers excuses or shifting of blame. The opportunity paradigm also resonates strongly with contemporary values of corporate social responsibility and authenticity. In the age of social media, stakeholders can quickly discern hollow statements from genuine commitment. Thus, viewing crises through the lens of opportunity often leads to communication that is more honest about shortcomings and more aspirational about change. For instance, Southwest Airlines faced a large-scale crisis in October 2021 with mass flight cancellations. Initially, Southwest attributed the disruptions to weather and air traffic control issues, which was met with skepticism and did not quell customer frustration (since other airlines weren’t as affected). The company eventually had to acknowledge internal issues (like staffing and scheduling problems) and promised to fix them. Analyses of this case (Thomsen, 2023) indicate that failure to promptly embrace a more transparent, improvement-oriented communication prolongs the reputational damage. Had Southwest from the outset treated the crisis as an opportunity to candidly address systemic problems and convey a roadmap to prevent recurrences, it might have regained public trust faster.

It is important to note that the paradigmatic shift is not about choosing either threat or opportunity in an exclusive way. Rather, effective crisis communication increasingly involves an integration of both: addressing the immediate threat *and* leveraging the opportunity for positive change. The evolution in thinking is toward broadening the objectives of crisis communication. Table 1 encapsulates this evolution by mapping key theories to these paradigms and contextualizing them with airline examples.

Table 1. Major Crisis Communication Theories: Threat vs. Opportunity Paradigms in Aviation

Theory / Model	Key Proponents (Year)	Paradigm Alignment	Core Focus and Strategy	Aviation Industry Illustration
Corporate Apologia	Ware & Linkugel (1973); Hearit (2006)	Threat Paradigm	Defensive rhetoric to rebut accusations and protect image. Emphasizes explanations, denial, or justification over apology.	<i>E.g.</i> Airline executives issuing formal statements defending the airline after a crisis. In 2017, United Airlines initially defended its staff's actions in the passenger removal incident, framing them as following policy, which reflects an apologia stance before later conceding fault.
Image Repair (Restoration) Theory	Benoit (1995, 1997)	Threat Paradigm	Repertoire of communication strategies to restore reputation after a crisis. Focuses on mitigating damage via denial, evading responsibility, reducing offensiveness, corrective action, or mortification. Goal is to "protect...facing a public challenge to its reputation".	<i>E.g.</i> After the crash of an aircraft, an airline might use bolstering ("our safety record has historically been excellent") and corrective action ("we are implementing new safety checks") to repair trust. Benoit & Czerwinski's study of USAir's crash response in the 1990s shows classic image repair tactics in aviation
Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT)	Coombs (2007)	Threat Paradigm	Evidence-based guidelines matching crisis response to crisis type and attributed responsibility. Focus on assessing reputational threat and selecting strategies (deny, diminish, rebuild, bolster) accordingly. Seeks to protect stakeholder trust by appropriate response.	<i>E.g.</i> For a "victim" crisis (like a bird strike causing engine failure), an airline may primarily provide instructing information and express sympathy, per SCCT, since blame on the airline is low. For a "preventable" crisis (maintenance failure), SCCT would advise apology and compensation. Airlines typically follow these patterns in press responses and are trained to gauge response by situation (as seen in various crisis manuals of carriers).

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Theory / Model	Key Proponents (Year)	Paradigm Alignment	Core Focus and Strategy	Aviation Industry Illustration
Contingency Theory of Crisis Management	Cameron, Pang & Jin (2008)	Threat Paradigm (adaptive)	Emphasizes a flexible stance on a continuum from defensive to accommodative, based on contingencies (e.g., evidence, public pressure). Acknowledges that strategy may shift during the crisis lifecycle.	<i>E.g.</i> A low-cost airline might start with a defensive posture to contest a misleading media report (if evidence is on its side), but later take an accommodative turn with apologies if new facts prove the airline at fault. The theory mirrors how airlines often adjust their communication – as seen when initial denial turns into apology if public outrage grows (as in United 2017 or Southwest 2021 cases).
Social-Mediated Crisis Communication (SMCC)	Jin & Liu (2010s)	(Broadens Threat Paradigm)	Not a threat vs. opportunity stance per se, but highlights new channels and actors. Focuses on how information spreads on social media and the need for organizations to engage with multiple online stakeholders (influencers, followers) during crises. Implies a move from one-way communication to interactive communication.	<i>E.g.</i> Airlines like Wizz Air and TAROM use Facebook/Twitter for real-time updates during operational crises (e.g., weather cancellations), replying to customer queries publicly. In crises, failure to address the social media outcry (as Blue Air experienced in 2022) can amplify threats; conversely, active social media engagement can turn potentially viral complaints into an opportunity to show care on a large stage.
Rhetorical Arena (Multivocal) Theory	Frandsen & Johansen (2010, 2017)	(Broadens Paradigm)	Envisions crisis comm as occurring in a “rhetorical arena” with many voices (organization, stakeholders, media, etc.). Stresses understanding and coordinating the interplay of these voices. The organization is one player	<i>E.g.</i> In the aftermath of the MH370 disappearance (2014), Malaysian Airlines had to navigate a global arena of communication: families on social media, international investigators, and 24/7 news, all contributing to the narrative. The airline’s crisis comm included not just press releases but also

Theory / Model	Key Proponents (Year)	Paradigm Alignment	Core Focus and Strategy	Aviation Industry Illustration
			among many, needing to communicate collaboratively.	monitoring and responding to rumors and stakeholder statements, exemplifying the arena concept.
Discourse of Renewal	Ulmer, Sellnow & Seeger (2007); <i>updated by</i> Sellnow et al. (2022)	Opportunity Paradigm	Advocates an optimistic, future-oriented communication focusing on lessons learned, ethical action, and organizational change for the better. Instead of dwelling on blame, emphasizes “moving beyond the crisis” with a vision of growth. Key components: strong stakeholder focus, values, and a narrative of hope and improvement.	<i>E.g.</i> After a through-and-through crisis, such as an accident or major service failure, an airline like TAROM could engage in renewal discourse by outlining a plan for comprehensive safety audits, inviting external experts to help reform, and communicating progress to the public. By doing so, it uses the crisis as an opportunity to reset and improve its operations, aiming to emerge as a safer and more customer-centric airline. AirAsia’s response in 2014 – marked by accountability and commitments to do better – is a real-world illustration of renewal principles in aviation.
Organizational Resilience & Learning (applied to comm.)	Weick & Sutcliffe (2007); Paraschi et al. (2024)	Opportunity Paradigm	Emphasizes learning from failures and building resilience. Communication is about transparency regarding the crisis and the changes implemented thereafter. Involves stakeholder engagement in reflecting on what went wrong and how to fix it.	<i>E.g.</i> During the COVID-19 pandemic, many airlines openly communicated their restructuring and innovation efforts (such as new hygiene protocols, flexible rebooking policies, etc.) as means to survive and better serve customers. A study of Greek airlines in the pandemic found strategies of “strategic renewal” – innovation and transformation – being communicated as part of recovery.

Theory / Model	Key Proponents (Year)	Paradigm Alignment	Core Focus and Strategy	Aviation Industry Illustration
				This reflects viewing the crisis as an opportunity to reinvent business models and communicate those positive changes to regain flyer confidence.

Note: The paradigms are not mutually exclusive; many modern crisis communication strategies integrate threat-mitigation with opportunity-seeking elements. The categorization above highlights the dominant orientation of each theory for analytical clarity.

Conclusion

Crisis communication in the aviation industry has undergone a significant conceptual broadening, evolving from a predominantly threat-centric paradigm to an approach that also embraces the opportunity paradigm. Early theories taught organizations how to shield themselves during turbulent times – how to craft messages that defend corporate image and reduce reputational harm. These contributions remain invaluable: even today, when a crisis hits an airline, there is an immediate need to address safety concerns, correct misinformation, and reassure stakeholders – fundamentally protective actions. However, as we have seen, an exclusively defensive stance can be myopic and potentially counter-productive in an era where transparency and accountability are paramount. The opportunity paradigm complements and extends traditional crisis communication by urging organizations to view the aftermath of crisis not just as a period of liability, but as a turning point for positive change.

For airline companies like TAROM, Wizz Air, Blue Air, and others, applying the opportunity paradigm means actively using crisis situations to demonstrate their values and commitment to stakeholders. It means communicating not only *what is being done* to manage the crisis, but also *what will be done better* going forward. Such an approach can transform public perception: stakeholders see an airline that is willing to learn and prioritize their well-being, rather than one that appears solely concerned with its own reputation. This is particularly critical in aviation, where public trust is the bedrock of business – passengers must trust an airline with their lives and schedules. Every crisis thus becomes a test of that trust and an occasion to either rebuild or lose it. Airlines that have embraced more opportunity-oriented communications – through sincere

apologies, visible reforms, and engagement with customer concerns – often find their reputations resilient or even enhanced in the long run. By contrast, those that respond with evasion, denial, or minimal communication can suffer prolonged reputational damage and customer alienation.

The integration of established theories (SCCT, image repair) with emerging ones (renewal, multivocal communication) provides a richer toolkit for practitioners and a more nuanced understanding for scholars. It reflects an important theoretical shift: from seeing crisis communication as a zero-sum game of threat minimization, to seeing it as a process that can yield mutual gains for both the organization and its stakeholders. This shift does not imply that crises are ever welcome – rather, it recognizes human and organizational capacity to find silver linings and improvements in the wake of disaster. As Ulmer, Sellnow, and Seeger famously noted, some crises are best understood not only as dangers to be survived, but as “opportunities for substantial change” that can benefit both organizations and their publics.

In conclusion, the aviation industry’s experiences with crises illustrate the necessity of this dual outlook. Effective crisis communication for airlines in the 21st century involves managing the threat – through prompt, responsible actions and messages – while also seizing the opportunity to renew and reform. The evolution from the threat paradigm to the opportunity paradigm in crisis communication theory ultimately advocates for a more balanced and forward-looking approach. By learning from past crises and integrating those lessons into future crisis strategies, airline companies can not only avert catastrophes but can also emerge from crises with stronger stakeholder relationships and a more robust organizational identity. This theoretical evolution underscores a hopeful message: even in the worst of times, through adept communication and sincere commitment to change, a crisis can lay the groundwork for a safer, more trustworthy, and more resilient organization.

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